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THE
THEORY
OF
PUBLIC SPEAKING

AN ADDRESS
BY
B. F. MESSERVY

DELIVERED BEFORE THE TEACHERS' INSTITUTE, CHARLOTTETOWN
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, ON THE 11TH FEBRUARY, 1899

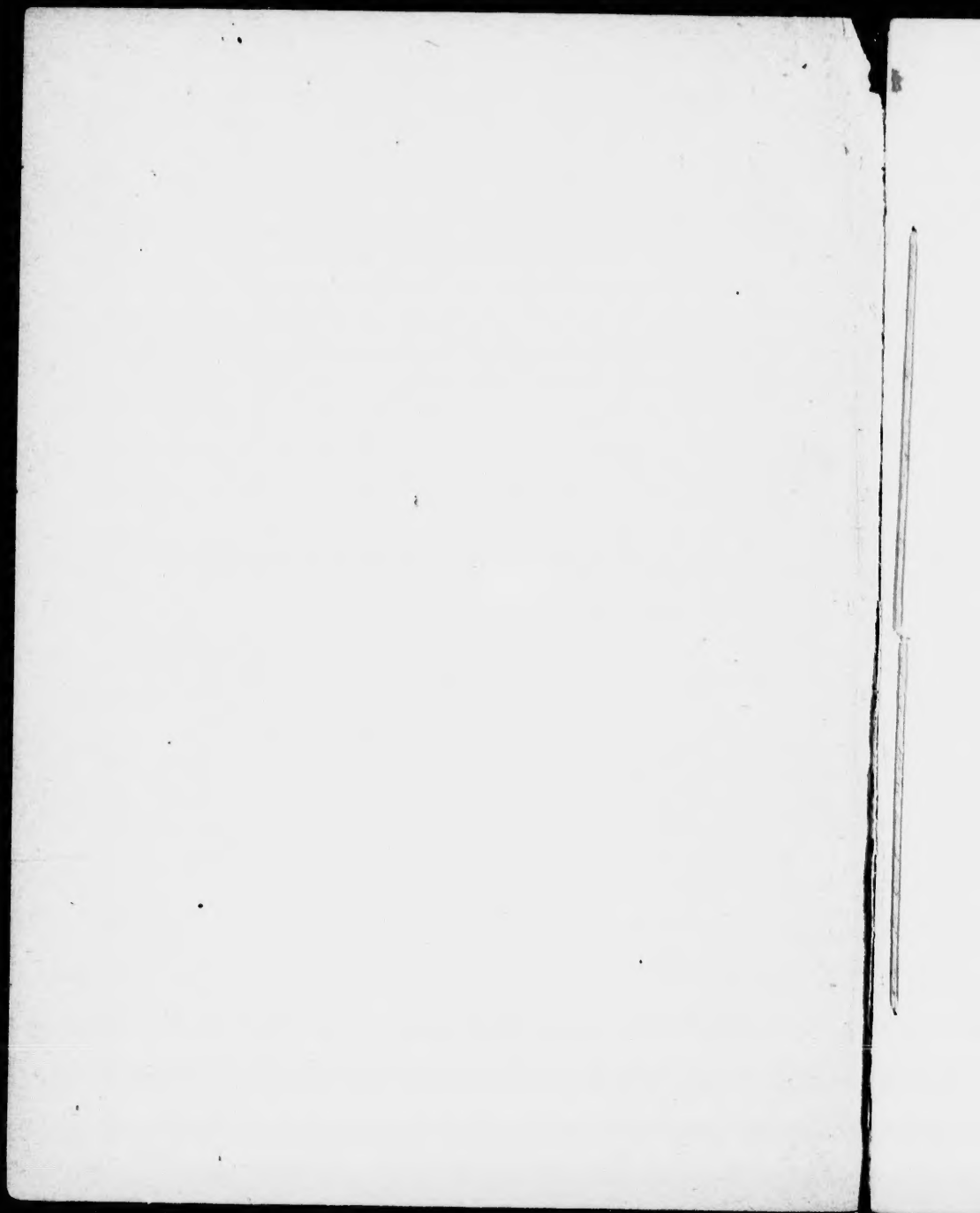


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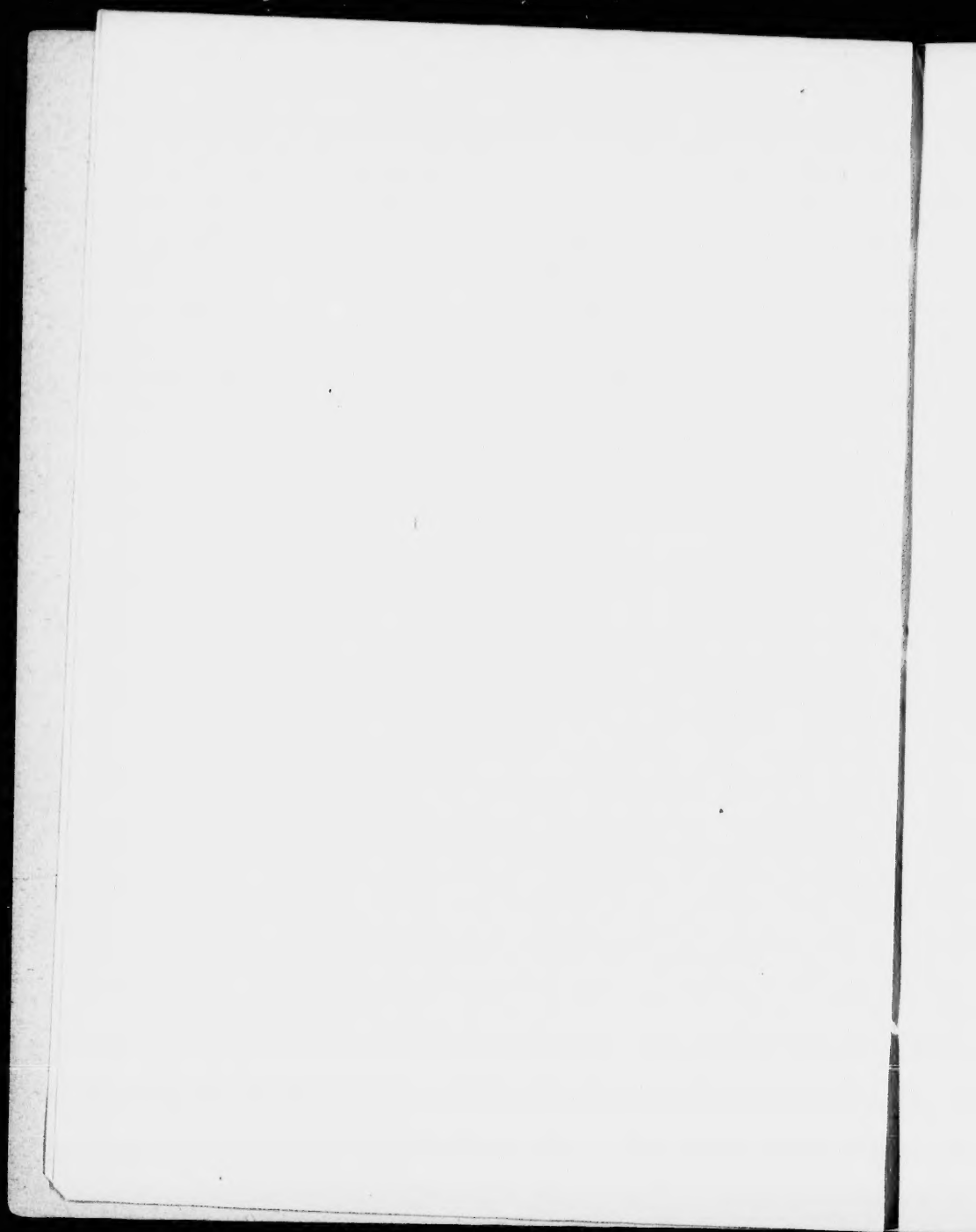
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THE
THEORY OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

AN ADDRESS

PART I.

CONSTRUCTION AND DELIVERY.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:—

I rise to address you on the theory of Public Speaking, not presuming at all that I am at ease in the practice, or have the art to any degree of perfection. A man may know the theory of swimming, and yet not be able to swim. He may know the theory of book-keeping; but when he has fairly begun to keep a set of books, he may find a great difference between the theory and the practice—and undoubtedly I shall have no little difficulty in presenting to you the theory of public speaking, seeing that I am conscious that I have not yet mastered the practical part; but it is good for one to have a theoretical knowledge of any subject, so long as it does not blind his eyes to the importance of its practical side. Theory and practice should go hand in hand, and the fact of a person having one should assist him in gaining the other.

Now public speaking is such a vast subject, inasmuch as it may be said to touch upon all knowledge, that it is not my intention to go much into detail, and my remarks shall have reference more particularly to a set speech—and I trust I shall be able to edify those of you, who have not given the subject much attention.

MATERIAL.

Before any one can speak well on any subject, he must have something to say about it, that is worth hearing. A choice and fluent collection of high-sounding terms alone will not do. There must be thought, and there must be knowledge! In fact, he must have the material for a speech; for if he rises merely for the sake of talking, he will be very apt to tire his audience very soon. A house cannot be built without lumber, brick or some such material; nor can a speech be constructed without ideas and knowledge.

Now there are various means of gaining knowledge, and of stimulating one's ideas, *e. g.*, by observation, by reading, by thinking, by hearing and by using one's memory. Any ordinary individual, having given a question not beyond his comprehension a good deal of attention, ought to have the material for at least one speech—in fact, he may be so full of the subject that he will not know how to begin. Having secured material, it will be well for him to write down all that he intends to say, selecting what he considers telling arguments and facts, and rejecting anything weak, trivial or not bearing on the subject.

ORDER.

But a house is not built merely by gathering a certain quantity of lumber, brick or stone together; nor is a speech constructed simply by having the material for one. The next step is to place it in order, by arranging the ideas, facts, arguments, illustrations, and even the very words in such an order as will be calculated to produce the greatest effect. This is a very important matter—it is just as important in the matter of making a speech as the marshaling of forces on the field of battle in the art of war! Take the best passages in English literature, and change the order of the ideas here and there a little, and in many

cases the effect would be completely spoiled. Not only does the proper arrangement of words, sentences and paragraphs produce a good effect on the audience, by reason of the rhythm, logical sequence of ideas and clearness involved ; but it also gives the speaker a better grasp of his subject, which, while affording greater ease to himself, will add more force and authority to his utterance. Of course in throwing the material into the proper order, carefulness and sound discretion are required, and very often it will be found necessary to make changes and eliminations, in order to give to the whole effort a harmonious effect.

STYLE.

Having selected the material and thrown it in order, the next thing to be attended to is the style. The very best language should in general be employed—all ungainly compounds, slang phrases and obsolete words, or anything that would mar the diction of a speech, should be avoided. Briefly, suitable words and suitable sentences should be used. Such sentences should not be too long or labored, but should reveal clearly and forcibly what the speaker intends to convey. A great deal here will depend on the education of the speaker ; natural talent alone will not suffice. If he has been accustomed to read the best literature, and to move in cultured society, he ought to have no great difficulty in clothing his ideas with fitting language. I have no hesitation in recommending the practice of reading aloud the works of the best English and American writers as a great help to one in the matter of composition. In regard to this topic of style, volumes might be written, and the World's best literature affords a wide range for profitable study.

MEMORY.

The next step is to use the memory. What is the use of going to the trouble of composing a speech, re-arranging all its paragraphs, sentences and words, and polishing its

language, unless it is done with the view of gaining a better grasp of the subject matter, and of memorising it to a certain extent. At least I think it will be found advisable for one not only to become familiar with the ideas, that are to be expressed, but also with the language that is intended to be used, even supposing that in the delivery one does not conform to it word for word. Of course the fact of a person having the ideas properly arranged and fittingly expressed in his own language, will make the task of memorising the substance, general order and diction of a speech, less difficult for him than at first it might appear. While not recommending the practice of relying entirely on notes, on account of the breaks that it is apt to make in one's remarks, still it is well to have them; for even if they are not utilized during the delivery of a speech, they will afford a certain amount of confidence to the speaker, and relieve him of any lurking anxiety caused by the fear of losing the thread of any part of his discourse.

What I have said, if followed, will involve a great deal of preparation and necessitate no little labor, particularly to beginners, for whom these remarks are chiefly intended; but the time so devoted will by no means be valueless after the speech, so prepared, is delivered. On the other hand, the speaker will derive some lasting benefit, which will be more apparent, if he has to speak along the same line on some future occasion, which may not unfrequently happen. This habit of thorough preparation, whenever possible, will enable him to speak with more ease and to better advantage than he otherwise would, when there is *not* time to prepare, such as on some sudden emergency or in the ordinary course of public business.

DELIVERY.

The last thing to be considered in this part of the address is the delivery. Demosthenes, the greatest orator that the World ever saw, being asked what were the three

chief points of eloquence, replied: "Delivery, delivery, delivery." Voice, countenance and body should conform to the subject in hand, and this, of course, implies considerable painstaking, training, thought and good sense—and here it might be said that the natural tone and natural manner have the greatest effect. A speech should be nothing more than a talk to many. If you or I address a person we use such a tone and such a manner,—if we are addressing two or three people we slightly modify our voice, countenance and gestures to suit the altered circumstances, and as the number increase we change our tone and manner accordingly; so that a speech may be regarded as a talk to a number of people, and the nearer it approaches the conversational tone, the more successful the effect will likely be, other things being equal.

I have shown that in order to make a speech, first you must have the *material*, secondly that it should be thrown into such an *order* as will be calculated to produce the greatest effect, thirdly that the *language* employed should be *choice* and *suitable* to the subject, fourthly that the *memory* should be used as far as practicable, and lastly that the *delivery* is the most important point, for by it the whole effort is judged; but nevertheless the other details which I have mentioned should receive careful attention, as on these preliminary steps the success of the delivery will largely depend.

PART II.

ANALYSIS OF A SPEECH.

A well-constructed speech may be considered under the following arbitrary divisions: 1. Exordium. 2. Statement. 3. Proof. 4. Peroration.

EXORDIUM.

The first division, the exordium, is merely an introduction, preparing the minds of the hearers for what is to follow. It will be almost useless for the speaker to proceed, unless in or after his opening remarks he will have gained the attention, and, if possible, the sympathy of the audience; for otherwise the rest of his speech will be liable to fall flat—and since a favorable hearing is the main object with which an exordium must be composed, it is requisite that in the first place the speaker should take into account the probable feelings of the audience to be addressed and their attitude, as to whether they will be against him, for him or indifferent.

When the audience is known to be in the speaker's favor, it should be an easy matter for him to frame such an exordium as will suit the occasion, although it is never well to take too much for granted concerning the indulgence or forbearance of an audience. They should as a general rule be approached in a conciliatory and respectful manner. It must be remembered, too, that they have a right to expect something in return for their time and attention. If 200 auditors be addressed for thirty minutes, it is evident, considering them individually, that 6000 minutes or 100 hours of their time would be consumed; so that if a speaker is sometimes inclined to speak nonsensically or in a prosy manner, certainly before a large and intelligent audience is not the place for it; but this is not always remembered.

If the audience should happen to entertain prejudice or hostility against the speaker, it will be necessary for him to allay those feelings as much as lies in his power, by pursuing such a course as will tend to gain the good-will of the hearers at least for the time being; and in order to accomplish this, he may sometimes be obliged to use very great tact and skill; but the circumstances of the case will guide his judgment as to the best mode of procedure.

If the audience should happen to be in an indifferent or heedless mood, it will be necessary for the speaker to arouse their attention; for instance, by showing that the subject under discussion concerns them, or otherwise is worthy of their consideration, or by resorting to some expedient, as the case may require.

Demosthenes, the most eloquent man at a time when oratory had reached its highest stage of perfection, was indirectly accused by Aeschines, his political opponent, on some technicalities for accepting a golden crown as a reward for services rendered by him to his state, the republic of Athens; and certainly had Demosthenes failed to make any but a strong and skillful reply, he would have been a ruined man; for his enemy had seized the opportunity of reviewing the whole record of his public and private life, having heaped upon him abuse and accusation, based on charges, which were in some degree well-founded; so that when the turn of Demosthenes came to reply, he realized at once how much hatred and prejudice had been stirred up against him by the speech of his rival—and knowing this, knowing how the minds of his fellow-citizens were inflamed against him, he deemed it best to open his defence in this form :—

"In the first place, ye men of Athens, I make my prayer to all the powers of Heaven, that such affection as I have ever invariably discovered to this state and all its citizens, you now may entertain for me on this present trial : and (what concerns you nearly, what essentially concerns your religion and your honor) that the gods may so dispose your minds as to permit me to proceed in my defence, not as directed by my adversary, (that would be severe, indeed !) but by the laws and by your oath; in which, to all the other equitable clauses, we find this expressly

added,—‘Each party shall have equal audience.’ This imports not merely that you shall not prejudge, not merely that the same impartiality shall be shown to both; but, still further, that the contending parties shall each be left at full liberty to arrange and to conduct his pleading as his choice or judgment may determine.”

“In many instances hath Aeschines the entire advantage in this cause. Two there are of more especial moment. First, as to our interests in the contest, we are on terms utterly unequal; for they are by no means points of equal import, for me to be deprived of your affections, and for him to be defeated in his prosecution. As to me—but when I am entering on my defense, let me suppress everything ominous, sensible as I must be of this the advantage of my adversary. In the next place, such is the natural disposition of mankind, that invective and accusation are heard with pleasure, while they who speak their own praises are received with impatience. His, then, is the part which commands a favorable acceptance: that which must prove offensive to every single hearer is reserved for me. If, to guard against this disadvantage, I should decline all mention of my own actions, I know not by what means I could refute the charge or establish my pretensions to this honor. If, on the other hand, I enter into a detail of my whole conduct, private and political, I must be obliged to speak perpetually of myself. Here, then, I shall endeavor to preserve all possible moderation, and what the circumstances of the case necessarily extort from me must, in justice, be imputed to him who first moved a prosecution so extraordinary.”

The key-note of this admirable exordium is that he relies on the justice of heaven, but at the same time artfully seeks the sympathy and support of men, without any appearance of sacrificing his manhood, or dignity—and carrying the same kind of skill throughout his speech, he succeeded in winning the hearts of his countrymen, and in enlisting their support, in spite of the misdeeds which he had committed in the past. The charges preferred against him accordingly were not sustained, and Aeschines being involved in legal proceedings for false and malicious accusation, found such a revulsion of public opinion against him, that he was obliged to go into banishment, a punishment similar to that which he had exerted his utmost energies to impose on Demosthenes.

While in exile Aeschines taught a school of rhetoric, and it is said that one day he read the speech that he had delivered in this trial, to his pupils, who applauded somewhat, and afterwards he read the speech of Demosthenes, which was received with much greater applause. “And,” said he, “how must you have been affected had you heard him

deliver it?" Such was his tribute to the eloquence of Demosthenes. It is conceded, by the way, that the Speech on the Crown is the greatest effort in oratory that was ever delivered; and its high merit as a rhetorical composition has been recognized and praised by such an eminent scholar as was the late William E. Gladstone.

In composing an exordium one should closely examine the conditions, under which every single speech of any consequence is to be delivered, such conditions as centre around the speaker, the audience, the time and the place. The study of the best examples, ancient and modern, can also be recommended, and as the exordiums of the best speeches are not very long, (in fact length is generally considered a fault), this will involve no great labor; but above all I advise continual practice.

STATEMENT.

The statement of facts is the next division of a speech, but does not call for any lengthy treatment. It should be clear, concise and probable, setting forth all that the audience should know, with the view of their having an intelligent understanding of the question and the arguments bearing thereon. The language here should be plain and unadorned.

PROOF.

The next division is the proof, which may be subdivided into argument, testimony, and finding fault. The general method of procedure for a speaker is first to establish his own arguments, and then to overthrow those of his opponent logically and in a regular manner—and under this division of proof, which will comprise the main part or body of a speech, there will be ample scope for the exercise of one's ability to the extent of its capacity, by bringing forward telling arguments and weighty evidence, by using well chosen examples and illustrations, by occasionally relating a story or

fable with a moral or point bearing directly on the question, by sometimes resorting to sarcasm, irony and other forms of wit, by striking a contrast or rising to a climax. But this part of a speech is so comprehensive, that time will not permit us to enter into many particulars. However, it will not be out of place here to expose some of the wiles and methods of an accomplished orator, as observed by Cicero :

"He often treats one and the same thing in many different manners, and dwells a long time on the same idea. He often extenuates some point, and often turns something into ridicule. He occasionally appears to change his intention and vary his sentiments. He proposes beforehand the points which he wishes to prove. He winds up his arguments with fresh reasons. He beats down the adversary with questions. He answers questions, which as it were, he himself has put. He sometimes wishes to be understood as meaning something different from what he says. He often doubts as to what he had best say, or how he had best say it. He arranges what he has to say under different heads. He leaves out or neglects some points, while there are others to which he devotes special attention beforehand. He often throws the blame on his adversary for the very thing for which he himself is found fault with. He often appears to enter into deliberation with his hearers, and sometimes even with his adversary. He describes the conversation and actions of men. He divides the men's minds from the subject under discussion. He often turns the discussion into mirth and laughter. He adduces comparisons. He cites precedents. He attributes one thing to one person, and another to another. He checks anyone who interrupts him. He says he is keeping something back. He adds threatening warnings of what his hearers must beware of. He often takes a bolder license. He is sometimes even angry. He sometimes utters reproaches, deprecates calamity, uses the language of supplication, and does away with unfavorable impressions. He sometimes departs a very little from his subject to express wishes, or to utter execrations, or to make himself the friend of those men, before whom he is speaking."*

Moreover, in this connection, such studies as logic, science, history and philosophy will prove useful. Is there any need to mention grammar and rhetoric?—and, in fact, nearly every study can be turned to some account by an able speaker. Knowledge combined with skill, is power—and the person of limited and defective information must almost invariably yield in argument to the man of learning and attainments.

PERORATION.

The peroration is the conclusion of a speech. A speaker

* De Oratore, XL.

should always aim at making a good beginning; but a good ending is of paramount importance, as it will tend to carry the audience with him. On the other hand a poor ending will create a sense of dissatisfaction in the hearers, and may spoil the effect of a speech well constructed and almost faultless in other respects. In the peroration ornate language will usually find a place, great latitude being here allowed to a speaker in the use of figures of speech, as well as in giving expression to exalted sentiments, in exaggerating his side of the question, in heightening the effect, in working on the feelings of his hearers, in influencing their will or arousing their energies, and even in stirring up their passions, as the case may justify.

Enumeration, which is merely the summarizing of the chief points that have previously been made by a speaker, is not unfrequently employed as a fitting way in which to bring a speech to a close, with the view of refreshing the memories of the hearers.

In regard to this division it is very difficult to lay down particular rules. A speaker's good sense ought to suggest what is suitable to any special occasion. Moreover, one can master such details only partially by precept. Practice will give ease and expertness; while example must be our chief guide. The perorations, then, of the most finished speeches of the greatest orators should be read, analyzed and studied.

Perhaps we cannot do better than to quote, as an example of a telling peroration, the one with which Demosthenes wound up his celebrated oration on the Crown :—

"There are two distinguished qualities, Athenians, which the virtuous citizen should ever possess—(I speak in general terms, as the least invidious method of doing justice to myself)—a zeal for the honor and pre-eminence of the state in his official conduct; on all occasions and in all transactions, an affection for his country. This nature can bestow. Abilities and success depend on another power. And in this affection you find me firm and invariable. Not the solemn demand of my person; not the vengeance of the Amphictyonic Council, which they denounced against me: not the terror of their threatenings; not the flattery of their

promises, no, nor the fury of those accursed wretches, whom they roused like wild beasts against me; could ever tear this affection from my breast. From first to last, I have uniformly pursued the just and virtuous course of conduct; assertor of the honors, of the prerogatives, of the glory of my country; studious to support them, zealous to advance them, my whole being is devoted to this glorious cause. I was never known to march through the city with a face of joy and exultation at the success of a foreign power; embracing and announcing the joyful tidings to those, who, I supposed, would transmit it to the proper place. I was never known to receive the successes of my own country with tremblings, with sighings, with eyes bending to the earth, like those impious men who are the defamers of the state, as if by such conduct they were not defamers of themselves, who look abroad, and when a foreign potentate hath established his power on the calamities of Greece, applaud the event, and tell us we should take every means to perpetuate his power."

"Hear me, ye immortal gods! and let not these their desires be ratified in heaven! Infuse a better spirit into these men! Inspire even their minds with purer sentiments! This is my first prayer. Or, if their natures are not to be reformed; on them, on them only, discharge your vengeance! Pursue them both by land and sea! Pursue them even to destruction! But to us display your goodness in a speedy deliverance from impending evils, and all the blessings of protection and tranquility!"

Certainly neither the delivery of Demosthenes, nor the euphonious Greek language in which that eminent orator spoke, nor the intense interest awakened by this trial, can be brought before us here; but the sentiments and their skillful arrangement, no doubt, give us some faint idea as to the effect that this peroration must have produced at the time. Is there not the note of triumph of a victor running through it all—and can you not almost imagine his foes after the delivery of such scathing denunciation, casting their eyes about for a place of refuge from the impending wrath? How could they withstand his outburst of eloquence! How must the people of Athens been drawn to the side of Demosthenes by such irresistible oratorical power, which can be perceived even in the translated language—and is it any wonder that Aeschines, the hated prosecutor, was forced to go into ignominious banishment?

CONCLUSION.

In my remarks, I have necessarily passed over many things, not because they are deemed unimportant, but because time is wanting. If anyone wishes to become more

acquainted with the theory of public speaking, let him study books on the subject, of which there are no small number, some of them containing invaluable suggestions ; and let him not neglect to read Cicero's *DE ORATORE*, either translated or in the original, and other rhetorical works of that author. Many of the principles laid down by him are embodied in this address.

Now, it is scarcely necessary to refer to the utility of the art ; for a knowledge of it is certainly useful at business meetings, in conventions, in parliaments, in societies, in the pulpit, at the bar—not forgetting the lecture desk—and furthermore, it is said that the orator in every age and in every country has risen to distinction. Do we not see the power of public speaking, in this century alone, exemplified in the lives of Peel, Webster, Disraeli, Lincoln, Gladstone—and even, in our own little Province, in the lives of Whelan and Davies ? Is it not, then, a subject worthy of our consideration ? Why is it, I ask, so much neglected in our schools and colleges ? We know that it was part of the curriculum of education of those Roman and Greek writers, whose works, many centuries after they were written, are admired and studied in the universities of the world. When these works, through the agency of the art of printing became more diffused, did not England, did not Europe, and in fact the world, enter on a new era of intellectual activity and progress ? Will any of the vaunted systems of education in vogue at the present day produce results, so glorious, so transcendental, and at the same time so palpable ? Such matters, such questions, and my whole address, Teachers of the City of Charlottetown, I leave for you to consider.